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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP AND PRM
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SUBJECT: ROYG FACES OBSTACLES TO FULL REFUGEE REGISTRATION
AND POLICY COORDINATION

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶11. (C/NF) Although refugee-registration centers are now open in Sana'a and Aden, many questions loom over refugee affairs in Yemen. Widespread discrepancies in official reporting on the number of refugees in the country, and ineffectual communication and cooperation between government ministries have led to differing opinions on how to approach the topic. Aid agencies and UNHCR continue to move forward and report significant successes in their programs, but with numbers of incoming refugees rising, a fully coordinated approach and continuing foreign assistance will be necessary to ensure the communities, stability and integration. End Summary.

"I'm Registered, Now What?"

¶12. (SBU) The first ever refugee registration centers in Yemen opened in Sana'a in March and in Aden in early July. According to the Ministry of Interior (MOI), there are currently plans for future centers in Ta'iz, Hudaydah, Mukalla, and Shabwah, although no dates have been set for their inauguration. These centers will be run entirely by the ROYG.

¶13. (SBU) While numbers of registrants appear to be steadily growing, they still represent a meager percentage of the total number of suspected refugees in Yemen. The Sana'a registration center has already accounted for between 12,000 - 14,000 refugees. Yet, UNHCR's official count at the end of June numbers 154,009 known refugees countrywide, over 95 percent of whom are Somalis. Unofficial estimates from the MOI and Ministry of Human Rights put the total numbers anywhere between 500,000 to 1.2 million. (Comment: Most of our interlocutors estimate the number to be between 500,000 - 600,000. End Comment.) Moreover, the newest UNHCR numbers report almost 30,000 new arrivals by sea half-way through 2009, compared with the 50,000 estimated arrivals for all of **¶12008**. Since return to their homeland is not viable for most Somali refugees, and fewer than 1,000 are resettled every year, refugee work in Yemen focuses on integration. Proper registration of the refugees thus serves an important role in providing them with vital services such as health care, counseling, vocational training and educational opportunities. Additionally, having standardized documentation will allow the ROYG a better estimate of the total refugee population and protect the refugees by facilitating their ability to prove their legal status.

¶14. (C/NF) The opening of new centers and increasing

registration of refugees indicates a degree of success. However, government officials and NGOs retain some skepticism. Colonel Abdelsalam Johar from the MOI's Refugee Department told CONOFF on July 8 that many refugees are reluctant to register due to fear of deportation or government monitoring. Nagi Khalil, the country director of Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), noted that refugees mistakenly believe that they have nothing to gain by registering: they already have legal status in Yemen, and should the government ever wish to close its doors, registration would be a great way to keep track of everyone they wished to deport. Similarly, UNHCR and the MOI both noted that Somalis are more likely to register than the Ethiopians or Eritreans who do not have automatic status and are much more likely to be deported or detained. While there are no signs that Yemen plans to reverse its open door policy towards Somalis, Ambassador Mohamed al-Shami, the head of the Africa department at the MFA and chair of the National Sub-Committee on Refugee Affairs (please protect), confided that he personally disagrees with Yemen's refugee policy. Citing Yemen's internal conflicts and severe poverty, Ambassador Shami does not find it appropriate that the government provides any of its scarce resources to refugees.

Intra-Government Wrangling

¶5. (C/NF) The National Committee for Refugee Affairs (NCRA) is supposed to meet quarterly, but meetings have allegedly been infrequent and poorly attended. The bulk of the work has thus shifted to the sub-NCRA headed by Ambassador Shami, whose work consists mostly of soliciting foreign donations for ROYG refugee programs. Meanwhile, a draft refugee law

submitted to Parliament last year remains stalled. Abdelkarim al-Wazan, a representative from the Ministry of Human Rights, claimed that his ministry has been largely marginalized and is generally granted minimal support and funding. Despite Johar's claims that his work is a top priority of the Minister of Interior, recent press reports of Somalis fighting with the Houthis (Shia rebels in the northern governorate of Sa'ada) against government forces have disillusioned some in the MOI on the need to help the refugee populations, according to Khalil. (Comment: We have seen only one such press report, and are unconvinced of its veracity. End Comment.)

¶6. (C/NF) Despite inter-agency difficulties within the ROYG, there have been some successes. UNHCR and the Ministry of Human Rights have recently created a joint task force to address problems in the refugee communities. According to Wazan, the majority of complaints received from the refugees deal with their treatment by UNHCR employees. The Ministry has therefore partnered with UNHCR to improve training for their employees. UNHCR continues educating both refugees and government agencies about the importance of registration, and is fighting to earn a monitoring position on the sub-NCRA. Moreover, the MOI is in the process of upgrading its refugee unit to a full-scale department, which should include increased resources and attention within the ministry, according to UNHCR. ADRA reports ongoing success in its programs in Aden and is planning to open a refugee community center in Sana'a during the next fiscal year.

Comment

¶7. (C/NF) As long as the security situation in Somalia remains volatile, the number of refugees in Yemen will continue to grow, as will the number of Somalis who die en route. Already dealing with a host of other internal problems, Yemen lacks the capacity to fully accommodate and coordinate the growing number of arrivals. The ROYG needs to improve its coordination internally and with international stakeholders and make refugee affairs a priority. In addition, foreign assistance through UNHCR, ADRA, Save the Children and the various other organizations will remain vital for the continued security of the some of the most

vulnerable communities in Yemen. End Comment.
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